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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 DHAKA 006647

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E.O. 12958: DECL: 11/15/2016

TAGS: KDEM PGOV BG

SUBJECT: DHAKA INCHES BACK TO NORMAL AMID RUMORS OF  
BLOCKADE SUSPENSION

REF: DHAKA 06644

Classified By: P/E Counselor D.C. McCullough, reason para 1.4 d.

¶1. (C) Summary. There were no reports of major incidents during the fourth day of the opposition's nationwide transportation blockade program in Bangladesh. Traffic is nearing normal levels in many areas of Dhaka, and demonstrators appear more festive than confrontational. Two Awami League leaders predicted to us their party would soon announce a three-day suspension of the blockade to allow more time for the political talks underway on the fate of the Election Commission. End Summary.

Dhaka Today

¶2. (SBU) Dhaka was largely peaceful today as the Awami League-led blockade entered its fourth day to pressure the caretaker government to adopt wide-ranging electoral changes, particularly the purging of the Election Commission. Traffic in many areas neared normal levels, and more shops were open. Police escorted demonstrators marching to assembly points, where there was singing, dancing, and burning of effigies of Chief Election Commissioner Aziz.

¶3. (SBU) Activists of the Bangladesh Nationalist Party and Jamaat Islami rallied well away from their rivals, averting a potential flashpoint for violence. Major transportation arteries remain shut down, but there are unconfirmed reports the government is arranging armed escorts for trucks to exit Chittagong port, where some activity resumed.

¶4. (SBU) In Sylhet, a clash today between rival activists injured 20 persons, according to local media. There are no other reports of violence.

Rumored Election Commission Resignations

¶5. (C) Local media reports aside, three election commissioners are not planning to abandon their embattled chief, according to one commissioner. At a meeting with the commissioners this afternoon, he told us, Chief Election Commissioner Aziz reiterated his determination to stay on the job.

Controversial Police Official Transferred

¶6. (C) The senior police official alleged to have orchestrated the November 13 violence where a police van ran over two activists (reftel) has been transferred to Rangamati, the Bangladeshi equivalent of Siberia. His

transfer was one of three privately demanded by the Awami League to a caretaker government official in exchange for suspension of the blockade.

¶7. (C) Another demanded transfer involved Home Secretary Jahurul Islam, an alleged partisan of Jamaat Islami who apparently spearheaded the abortive November 12 move to deploy military forces in support of civilian authorities; his transfer to another ministry was apparently halted in mid stream, presumably in response to pressure from the former ruling coalition.

Assurances to Business

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¶8. (SBU) President/Chief Adviser Ahmed yesterday assured nervous business leaders that the current political situation would end soon, according to press reports. The day before, Awami League Secretary General Jalil urged Bangladeshis to be patient for just a few more days.

Relief in Sight?

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¶9. (C) The Awami League-led coalition may announce as early as tonight a three-day suspension of its blockade program, according to two party leaders. In separate conversations with us, they said the suspension would cite the need to allow talks underway on the Election Commission more time to develop.

Comment

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¶10. (C) Whether a blockade suspension materializes or not, such optimism reflects a palpable reduction in street tensions, and hope that the two major political parties will continue to exercise restraint and take advantage of the new opportunity for dialogue initiated by four caretaker government advisers.

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